

Speech-Language Pathology in the Schools: A Study of Variables Impacting Personnel Shortages in Urban Schools

A Senior Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to more fully understand the issues impacting recruitment and retention of SLPs in urban settings. The ultimate goal of the research will be to gain a more far-reaching understanding of the urban employment setting in speech-language pathology. More specifically, it will attempt to identify the characteristics of urban employment that: (1) attract SLPs in the first place (2) promote their retention or persuade them to maintain their employment as a long-term career choice, and most importantly (3) causes them to choose another employment setting initially or once employed by a major urban school district, causes them to leave and find employment in another work setting.

Method: Speech-language pathologists employed by the Cincinnati Public Schools, the Columbus Public Schools, and the Cleveland Public Schools completed a questionnaire that probed several aspects of the urban employment setting that may prove to be attractive or problematic to the entry-level speech-language professional. A portion of the questionnaire was scored on the basis of an informal content analysis to find common responses. Modal response categories are reported for other responses.

Results: The total of 54 respondents indicated (1) lack parental involvement (2) high caseloads (3) lack of support from administration/staff (3) high amounts of paperwork and (4) limited resources as reasons for dissatisfaction working in an urban school setting. The respondents indicated rewards to working in an urban school setting as (1) improving the lives of urban children (2) enjoy working with children and (3) diversity/variety of children in caseload.

Conclusion: This study, when shared with urban school districts in the state of Ohio, can help suggest ways in which administrations and professional organizations can better attract and support speech language pathologists. In addition, these data can begin to provide suggestions for how the profession can address personnel shortages, especially in urban areas. The study will provide some new answers to a compelling problem and arm the Department of Speech and Hearing Science at OSU with key data to broaden its research and training mission. Since OSU is located in a

major urban setting these data will help target the proposal more precisely to current programmatic needs.

Speech-Language Pathology in the Schools: A Study of Variables Impacting Personnel Shortages in Urban Schools

Introduction

Ohio, the seventh largest state in the United States, is experiencing a long-standing, severe shortage of fully qualified personnel available to serve students with communication, language, and learning disabilities. The shortage of school speech-language pathologists (SLPs) is well documented, national in scope, and pervasive, affecting all regions of the state, despite its demographics, urban, suburban, or rural (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association 2004a, 2007, Boswell 2007). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the demand for speech language

pathologists are expected to increase by 39% through 2010 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002).

The Ohio Need

Ohio enrolls approximately 1,700,000 students in its public schools. Of this number, approximately 187,000 (11%) receive speech-language services and about 44,880 (24%) are children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds (Ohio Department of Education, 2000a). These figures do not include children with concomitant mental, physical, behavioral, and other deficits. If they were included, the number of children with communication disorders, in general, and the number of children from CLD backgrounds with communication disorders, would also increase dramatically. Like most other states, the shortage of personnel available to serve these students persists in Ohio. In December 2000, the Ohio Department of Education (2000b) projected the number of SLPs expected to terminate their employment in the public schools and the expected number of SLPs that would be needed each year from 2001 through 2020. For example, the projected number of additional full-time, funded SLPs needed for the 2002-2003, 2003-2004, and 2004-2005, 2005-2006, 2006-2007 school years was 270, 280, 286, 292, and 310 respectively. Equivalent or higher numbers of SLPs will be needed during each successive school year. In fact this need may increase substantially with the *additional turnover* (attrition) of approximately 300 to 325 school SLP positions each year due to resignations, retirements, and related factors

(Ohio Department of Education, 2000b). That means Ohio needs approximately 400 to 550 school SLPs per year to serve its school population adequately.

The National Need

Data gathered by ASHA and the Office of Special Education Programs (Office of Special Education Programs, 2002) show that the critical need for school SLPs continues to exist nationally and in Ohio. It is especially problematic in urban and rural areas. Some of the factors contributing to this need that were identified by SLPs in previous studies: (1) quality of the work experience (paperwork, support, etc.), (2) limited infrastructure in rural settings (resources, support, etc.), (3) specific training for work in the schools, (4) overly demanding caseload size (numbers, paperwork, etc.), (5) insufficient numbers graduating from universities, (6) preferences by entry-level graduates for other work settings, and most of all, and (7) scope of practice and pay commensurate with training, experience, and credentials.

Literature Review

Recruitment and Retention in Urban School Settings

ASHA's 2000 Schools Survey indicated a shortage of qualified SLPs in their school district (ASHA, 2001a), with a greater shortage of personnel in rural and urban areas

compared to suburban settings. A variety of effects were reported as a result of the shortages, including: (a) increased caseloads, (b) less opportunity for networking and collaborating, (c) decreased opportunities for individual services, (d) decreased quality of services, (e) increased number of staff without ASHA certification/masters-level training, (f) reduced duration or frequency of services, and (g) denial of services to children who need them (ASHA, 2001b; Legislative Office of Education Oversight, 1999).

The U.S. Office of Special Education Programs conducted a “Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education” in 2002. The most common barrier to recruiting SLPs according to the respondents was the “shortage of qualified applicants.” This study partially attributed to the decrease in qualified personnel to the high turnover rate of SLPs in the public school setting due to job dissatisfaction (Office of Special Education Programs, 2002). Along with these data it is important to point out a finding done by ASHA’s (2004b) national school survey. This survey indicated a total of 44.3% of certified SLPs do not work in the school setting.

The Current Study

This purpose of this study is to more fully understand the issues impacting recruitment and retention of SLPs in urban settings. While a number of recruitment barriers are known across all employment settings, there are few data available with regard to what

attracts clinicians to the urban employment environment and what drives them away. Informal discussions with SLPs who work in large urban school districts often yield conflicting data. Some SLPs say simply that they are totally committed to “big city” school employment while others say they would avoid those kinds of problems like the plague. There really is little known about what speech-language clinicians really like about the urban work environment compared to the issues that stress them so much that they would consider looking for employment elsewhere. Therefore, in this study we will explore the variables that may be contributing to the personnel shortage in speech-language pathology with a specific focus on urban settings.

Methods

Speech-language pathologists employed by the Cincinnati Public Schools, the Columbus Public Schools, and the Cleveland Public School were asked to complete a questionnaire that probed several factors and/or other aspects and components of the urban employment setting that may prove to be attractive or problematic to the entry-level speech-language professional. The questionnaire was sent to approximately 250 SLPs employed by the three largest school districts in Ohio, Cincinnati Public Schools, Columbus Public Schools, and Cleveland Public Schools. The survey was prepared using SurveyMonkey.com so that respondents could access the website in order to

complete the survey at their discretion. Their completion of the survey was voluntary and they were able to end their participation at any time prior to submitting it in final form for use in this study. A portion of the questionnaire was scored on the basis of an informal content analysis to find common responses. Modal response categories are reported for other responses.

Data analysis

The data collected here will be summarized using descriptive statistics. Because this study is considered exploratory, a content analysis of prose responses to selected questions will be undertaken.

Survey

See Appendix I.

Results

Of the 59 respondents, 27 (51%) had greater than ten years of experience in the schools with 25 (59.5%) indicating they have been in other urban settings before current position. The study indicated that 49 (92.5%) of the respondents work Full Time and 23 (43.4%) are 51 years or older. Almost all 48 of 53 (91%) respondents indicated a caseload size of a minimum of 51 or more children, with 18 (34%) indicating caseloads of 71 or more children, where the national recommendation is 40. Of the 52

respondents answering the question on location, 10 of the respondents were from Cleveland Public Schools, 25 from Columbus Public Schools and 17 from Cincinnati Public Schools.

The respondents indicated by listing the top three suggestions for challenges to recruitment: (1) Caseload size is too high (2) Student behavior concerns (3) Safety concerns (4) Lack of parental involvement (5) Lack of budget for resources. The following challenges were identified as challenges to retention: (1) Caseload size too high (2) Too much paperwork (3) Lack of support from administrators/teachers (4) Lack parental involvement (5) Complexity of needs of the population served. Lack of parental involvement, high caseloads, lack of support, collaboration, and communication with administrators and staff, high amount of paperwork, lack of time to provide services and therapy, and concerns about children's poverty and home life were all stated respectively as the hardest part of working in an urban school setting. However, the follow were identified as rewarding and most gratifying to working in an urban setting: (1) Improving the lives of urban children (2) Enjoy working with children (3) Diversity/variety of children in caseload.

Changes or actions that administrators could make to improve working conditions were also probed in this survey. The respondents indicated the following low-cost changes (< \$2000): (1) Improvements to therapy room/obtain a private room (2) Access to own

office supplies (3) Access to technology (4) Improved paperwork policies (5) Improved collaboration with staff. Higher-cost changes (>\$20K) were: (1) Hiring more SLPs (2) Hiring support staff/case manager/SLP aide (3) own separate room (4) Improving technology and room conditions.

Finally, this study investigated improvements to methods of recruitment and retention of SLP personnel. The following were suggested toward improved recruitment: (1) Lower caseloads (2) Sign-on bonuses (3) Value SLPs (4) Higher allowance for resources (5) Advertise the positive aspects of working in urban schools. In an effort to increase retention of current SLPs, urban school could use the recommended strategies or proposals to prevent SLPs from changing settings. Those recommendations were: (1) Support SLPs (2) Lowered caseloads (3) Eliciting staff support for SLPs (4) Limiting SLP transitions between buildings/schools (5) Pay raises.

Conclusion

The study will provide some new answers to a compelling problem and arm the Department of Speech and Hearing Science at OSU with key data to broaden its research and training mission. Since OSU is located in a major urban setting. These data will help target the proposal more precisely to current programmatic needs. When shared with urban school districts in the state of Ohio, these data can help suggest ways in which administrations and professional organizations can better

attract and support speech language pathologists. In addition, these data can begin to provide suggestions for how the profession can address personnel shortages, especially in urban areas.

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Appendix I.

Survey

Part I.

In the space below, please provide your response to the following questions.

1. Discuss up to three features (i.e., barriers) that cause SLPs to decide not to seek employment in urban schools.
2. Discuss up to three reasons you believe SLPs leave employment in urban schools.
3. For you personally, what is it about working in an urban school that you find most gratifying?
4. For you personally, what are the hardest parts about working in an urban school?

Part II.

Changes that could make a difference.

5. List one or more low-cost changes (<\$2000) to your work setting that you think would substantially improve your working conditions.
6. List one or more high cost changes (>\$20K) to your work setting that you think would substantially improve your work conditions.
7. List one or more ways that you believe administrators could improve their methods of recruiting SLPs to urban school districts.
8. List one or more ways that you believe administrators could improve their methods of retaining SLPs in urban school districts.

Part III.

Researchers have proposed a number of features that seem likely to affect SLPs' attitudes about school settings.

9. The following items have been described as negative factors affecting SLP job satisfaction. Rate the items below in terms of the extent to which they impact YOUR JOB SATISFACTION in an urban school.

Not at all			Somewhat		Very
	Important		Important		
1	2	3	4	5	6
					7

Lack of opportunities
to collaborate

Increases in the complexity
of caseloads

Limited professional
advancement

Concerns about personal
safety at school
Demands for team
participation

Caseload too high

Limited access to
technology

Parent interference

Work schedule

Insufficient planning/
meeting time

Insufficient benefits

Salary

Lack of respect for
what I do

Lack of support from
parents

Others understanding
the role of SLP

Lack of professional
development opportunities

Increase in the severity of disorders

Lack of administration support

Multi-cultural experience

Unable to complete CFY

Paperwork (IEP, meetings, etc.)

Environment (look, feel, etc.)

Workload too high

Increases in scope of practice

Isolation from other professionals

Concern for the safety of your students

Poor working conditions

Other (please specify)

Part IV. Personal data

10. Years of experience in the schools

0-3

4-10

11-20

21-30

30+

11. Previous work settings (check all that apply)

Urban (you've been in other urban settings before your current one)

Suburban

Rural

12. Do you hold the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology (CCC-SLP)?

Yes

No, but CFY is in progress

No

13. If you hold the CCC-SLP, number of years since you received it
Less than one to 3 years

4-10

11-20

21-30

30+

14. Current caseload (approximate number)

<20

20-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

61-70

71-80

>80

15. Your age

21-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

61-70

>70

16. Education level (check highest level attained)

Bachelors

Masters

Doctorate

17. Are you employed full- or part-time?

Full Time

Part Time, >50%

Part Time, <50%

18. City in which you currently work

Part V. Thank you!!

The survey is now over and we greatly appreciate your participation and efforts in this matter!

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